

## Stuart Lochhead Sculpture





## Jean-Baptiste, called Auguste Clésinger (Besançon 1814-Paris 1883)

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*Bacchante*  
*Marble, partially tinted*  
70cm high (27 1/2")

Signed on the front ribbon *J. CLESINGER* and inscribed on  
the back ribbon *2me ETUDE*



### *Fame and scandal*

Clésinger first studied in his father's atelier before being taken to Rome where he worked under Thorvaldsen. He then spent a few years travelling around Europe; unwilling to apply himself under the direction of a teacher, Clésinger followed his own impulses and was intensely ambitious. Settling in Paris, he began to exhibit at the Salon in 1843. In 1847 he caused a sensation with his *Woman bitten by a snake* (Musée d'Orsay, Paris) a remarkably sensuous and realistic reclining nude that attracted praise as well as virulent attacks from critics and the public. The model for this life-size marble was Apollonie Sabatier, a celebrated beauty who was his mistress for a time, as well as Baudelaire's muse. Now famous, Clésinger showed a similar figure at the Salon the following year, a *Reclining Bacchante* (Petit Palais, Paris) for which he won a first-class medal.



Reclining Bacchante, Marble, Petit Palais, Paris

While his sensuous, often scandalous works brought a series of success, the artist was also at times decried and considering himself misunderstood, he left for Rome where he lived in high style between 1856 and 1864. He continued to send work to the Paris Salon from Italy and upon his return to Paris was promoted to the rank of *officier* in the Légion of Honour. Clésinger possessed a powerful temperament and often his sculpture tends to provoke the senses. As many artists of the period, he had for models the Antique and Michelangelo, but unlike most of his contemporaries, he took pride in carving his own marbles. His oeuvre reveals a degree of experimentation with subjects, poses and materials; it is known that in the case of *Woman bitten by a snake*, he tinted the marble flowers onto which the figure rests.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This is suggested by Delacroix, who writes in his journal of March 13, 1847: "Hier Clésinger m'a parlé d'une statue de lui qu'il ne doutait pas que je n'aimasse beaucoup, à cause de la couleur qu'il y a mise" (1: 288). Gautier also describes the statue as tinted in his review of the Salon of 1847, indicating that colour was applied only to the marble "bed" of flowers: "Elle est là répandue sur un lit de roses et de fleurs imperceptiblement teintées de carmin et de bleu [...]" (La Presse, 10 avril). Vestiges of the original colour could still be seen as late as 1960 (C. Pichois, *Baudelaire, documents iconographiques*. Geneva, 1960, pp.135-38).

### *The Bacchante*

The Bacchante, a female attendant of the god Bacchus, was one of Clésinger's favourite subjects. His first treatment of the theme is the *Reclining Bacchante* exhibited at the 1848 Salon, which caused a stir and was a great success. Like his *Woman bitten by a snake* from the year before, the sculpture was inspired by Apollonie Sabatier, and Théophile Gautier called it "one of the most beautiful examples of modern sculpture". The artist would return to the subject of the Bacchante, shown reclining, standing, accompanied by a faun, or in bust form as in the present work.

It is difficult to date our sculpture with precision, yet it is manifest from the inscription on the ribbon ("2nd study") that Clésinger executed a similar *Bacchante* before our example. In any case, our bust relates to the famous portrait of Apollonie Sabatier (1847, marble; Musée d'Orsay); both works share the same cut at the shoulders, have a ribbon running between the breasts and display a richly folded drapery. A comparable bust showing a *Bacchante* holding a wine cup was sculpted in Rome in 1863 (Cleveland Museum of Art). Like ours, the latter is represented with an abundant crown of vine leaves that circles her head and falls on her shoulders. The marvellous treatment of the marble is remarkable. Noteworthy as well is the textured aspect of the hair, leaves and grapes, upon which Clésinger must have applied a little wax or a slightly tinted varnish, therefore providing a tonality recalling ancient marbles. This also highlights the whiteness and softness of the flesh. This graceful sculpture displays a sensual and melancholic plenitude that is unique to the artist. It also illustrates the neo-rococo taste then in vogue at the court of Napoleon III and Empress Eugénie.



Bacchante, 1863, Marble, Cleveland Museum of Art